

# The Bread Is Famously Good, but It Killed McDonald's

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ALTAMURA, [Italy](#), Jan. 10 - First, an inconvenient truth: This is not a new story. But somehow the tale of how the city with the best bread in Italy forced its McDonald's out of business never really got told, and is spilling out now.



David Yoder/Polaris, for The New York Times

Luca Digesu at his bakery. It drew customers from McDonald's. [More Photos >](#)

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All the elements of a McDonald's morality play remain relevant today: perceived corporate arrogance; traditional food triumphing over food product; a David in the form of a humble and graying baker against an expansionist American Goliath.

And, inevitably, it includes the French.

It was the leftist and Amero-skeptic French newspaper *Libération* that last week wrote the fullest account of what happened in Altamura, in southern Italy, where the road signs rightly welcome visitors to "The City of Bread."

"The long red mat was taken away secretly during the night," it reported, noting too that the "enormous M" over Piazza Zanardelli was "also packed up surreptitiously." The windows were covered "like a shroud on the victim of a culinary battlefield."

"Today," the newspaper said, "there are no longer Big Macs, Chicken McNuggets or industrial fries in Altamura."

What *Libération* neglected to say, as have most of the other articles in an irresistible landslide of coverage in print and on the Web, is that the McDonald's closed in December 2002. The paper spoke vaguely of events a "number" of months ago.

But no matter. The protagonists here in Altamura as well as many others are thrilled with the belated attention, and the distinction as the city whose food was so good that it closed down a McDonald's without really trying.

"What took place was a small war between us and McDonald's," said Onofrio Pepe, a retired journalist who founded an association here devoted to local delicacies. "Our bullets were focaccia. And sausage. And bread. It was a peaceful war, without any spilling of blood."

Mr. Pepe and several like-minded citizens of Altamura, a city of 65,000 residents, made up one wing of the army. They say they fought largely for pride and for their food, which includes a local mushroom called the *cardoncello*, focaccia, mozzarella and, most of all, a coarse-grain bread famous for millennia around Italy. The bread is protected as unique in European Union regulations, which note that Horace called it, in 37 B.C., "far the best bread to be had, so good that the wise traveler takes a supply of it for his onward journey."

When the McDonald's first opened in early 2001, Mr. Pepe said, he was not opposed to it, and even welcomed the 25 or so jobs it created. "In the beginning," he said, "it seemed like modernization."

Then the modern seemed to take over: McDonald's erected the huge arches on a pole near the old town center, jarringly near the 13th century cathedral, beaming yellow neon 24 hours a day (and disturbing, Mr. Pepe said, little falcons that nested in nearby trees).

"It gave the sense of a city being occupied," he said. "It was considered a sort of challenge. Not a challenge to confront in anger but with a smile. They brought in their products, and we had ours."

So his group held low-key protests to highlight local food, as another front on the war opened, very much unplanned.

A fourth-generation baker, Luca Digesu, now 35, opened *Antica Casa Digesu*, a small bakery right next to the McDonald's. He said he had had no intention of challenging it, but had merely hoped to shake free some customers attracted to the spot by the novelty.

"I was afraid of McDonald's," he said in his bakery on Tuesday. "I was afraid we would be completely glossed over. I was afraid no one would even notice us."

For a while, McDonald's drew in the customers of Altamura. "In the beginning," Mr. Digesu said, "McDonald's was McDonald's."

But soon there was a migration of locals who preferred their own version of fast food: hunks of thick focaccia like the dozen that Mr. Digesu was tending in the oven as he spoke. Part of the reason seemed economic: Mr. Digesu said a big slice of focaccia cost the same as a single McDonald's hamburger. It was also, clearly, preference.

McDonald's began fighting back, offering school trips to visit the kitchens, free rentals of the restaurant for children's birthday parties, coupons for children and a television for customers to watch soccer. Nothing seemed to work.

"They'd watch the game, and as soon as it was over go out and get focaccia," Mr. Pepe said.

Finally, in December 2002, after less than two years in operation, the McDonald's closed shop, according to the company, for lack of profitability. The huge space is now divided up into a jeans store and a bank. Mr. Digesu smiled broadly when asked how he felt that the Italian news media, which missed the story three years ago, are now hailing him as a modern-day David.

"I like it," he said. "McDonald's is big. I am small. Right now it is 1-0."

The company sees it differently, of course. "In no way is this a defeat for McDonald's," contended Mario Resca, president of McDonald's in Italy, saying he hoped to double the number of McDonald's here from the current 340. "If anything, I am proud that the local culture is appreciating its local cuisine because this means that McDonald's has stimulated a healthy competition."

In the end, it seems there may simply be places in the world where McDonald's is out of its depth on every front.

The landlord both for McDonald's and Mr. Digesu happened to be Mr. Digesu's brother-in-law. The brother-in-law gave Mr. Digesu a good deal on the rent. He did not do so for McDonald's.

Then there is the local food - cheap and overwhelmingly good - and the people who have eaten it for centuries and consider it as much their tradition as their history. Odd as it might seem in a corporate boardroom, they put no value on a McDonald's in Altamura.

"The majority couldn't imagine McDonald's becoming an integral part of their lives," said Patrick Girondi, 48, an entrepreneur from Chicago who has lived here for 15 years. "McDonald's didn't get beat by a baker. McDonald's got beat by a culture."

*Peter Kiefer contributed reporting for this article.*